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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and explores key parallels between college student retention theory and service-learning to better inform the practices of each. Service learning encompasses the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. It is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities designed to promote student learning and development. Service learning is a good fit with the interactionalist theory of V. Tinto and theories of retention in general because it provides multiple, meaningful connections between students, faculty, and community in ways that allow for diversity. The bonds service learning can promote appear to contribute to social integration. The paper presents 10 guidelines that combine what is known about service learning and retention to inform and extend both. As the guidelines are implemented, the key appears to be a provision of sound research that reinforces what appear to be logical connections between retention theory and service learning. (Contains 35 references.) (SLD)

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SERVICE-LEARNING & RETENTION: PROMISING POSSIBILITIES, POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning and college student retention have much in common though very few studies have actually addressed any direct relationship between the two constructs (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray, 2001). Since both service-learning and college student retention theory take into account the social (affective) and academic (intellectual) experiences of students, one might presume an abundance of empirical literature linking the two areas. However, only a few studies have empirically examined the relationship between either *service* and retention (see Roose, Daphne, Miller, Norris, Peacock, White, and White, 1997) or *service-learning* and retention (see Takahashi, 1999).

Although these initial studies demonstrated that involvement in community service or service-learning positively affected student retention at their respective institutions, the effects of selectivity are not controlled and limit the validity of results. Further studies that better isolate service-learning as a variable would be beneficial to more clearly examine the seemingly logical relationship between service-learning and retention. In the meantime, this article will describe and explore key parallels between retention theory and service-learning to better inform the practices of each.

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COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION THEORY

Tinto's (1975; 1986) interactionalist theory of college student departure has near paradigmatic status in the field of higher education and has been used widely by college and university personnel to assess retention issues (Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, 1997). Tinto's (1975) model is straightforward and describes the effects of such student characteristics as family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling on students' goal and institutional commitments. These commitments subsequently impact academic and social integration, which either reinforce or detract from ensuing goal and institutional commitments. As a result, all of these factors have an overall effect on student persistence in college.

Tinto's (1986) interactionalist theory of college student departure describes the interactive relationships between individuals and organizations and describes students' persistence or departure as a function of their interaction with the institutions in which they are enrolled. Person/environment congruence and academic and social integration are key concepts in Tinto's theory of student departure. Broadly speaking, Tinto (1993) describes three major sources of student departure: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution (p. 176).

Tinto's (1986) model asserts that colleges are very much like other human communities and the processes of both persistence and departure are similar to those processes within communities that influence the establishment of community membership.

> In the multifaceted world of the college, student decisions to leave are seen as directly and indirectly influenced by the individual's social (personal) and intellectual (normative) experiences in the various communities that make up the world of college. Specifically, they reflect the impact that those experiences have on individual goals and commitments both to the goal of degree completion and to the institution. Thus, decisions to leave reflect the individual's interpretation of those experiences and therefore those personal attributes that are associated with

> how individuals interact with and come to attach meaning to the world around them (Tinto, 1986, p. 367).

Looking specifically at Tinto's (1975) notions of academic and social integration, academic integration is measured by both grade performance and intellectual development, with grade performance being described as one of the single most important factors in predicting persistence in college. Correspondingly, intellectual development reflects a student's academic integration into the college in regard to one's congruence with the prevailing intellectual climate at the institution. In other words, grade performance relates to the meeting of certain explicit standards while intellectual development pertains to a student's identification with the norms of the academic system (Tinto, 1975, p. 104). Furthermore, intellectual development plays an integral role in a student's personal development (Tinto, 1975) and may affect a student's confidence and self-esteem, which in turn can impact various areas of a student's life.

It is important to note that although Tinto's notion of academic integration "makes sense" logically, this measure has not garnered support when tested empirically (Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, 1997). This may, in fact, be due to the way the measurement has been conceptualized by way of grade performance and intellectual development that may not effectively reflect the array of academic experiences that assist in or hinder student retention (Braxton and Lien, 2000).

In contrast, social integration can be viewed as a person's "fit" into the social system of the college, illustrated by the interactions between a student with a given set of characteristics and other persons of varying characteristics within the college. Friendship associations, relationships with faculty and administrators, and extracurricular activities each contribute to a student's social system and affect his/her social integration (Tinto, 1975).

The process of integration and adaptation is influenced by numerous factors and their complex interplay. To begin, two kinds of commitments - goal and institutional – are made by a

student. Goal and institutional commitments are made initially during entry into the institution and subsequently, after students have been initiated and socialized into both the academic and social systems. If a student's family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling result in initial positive goal and institutional commitments, then he/she proceeds toward greater social and academic integration wherein the student will make subsequent goal and institutional commitments and hence, persistence at the institution. If, however, the characteristics within social and academic integration are incongruent or proceed unmet, an individual's subsequent goal and institutional commitments could prove unstable or lacking. This circumstance could result in student departure.

Tinto (1993) outlines key tenets – "principles of effective retention" - institutions might incorporate to better retain their students. According to Tinto (1993) effective retention programs have the following three qualities:

- Effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve - student welfare is put ahead of other institutional goals;
- Effective retention programs are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students;
- Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members (Tinto, 1993, p. 146-147).

An enduring commitment to student welfare is characterized by an ethos of caring which is apparent throughout institutions that would themselves be called "student-centered" and place student welfare as their top priority. Second, in educating all students, successful retention programs focus on student learning so that students have the opportunity to glean the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the academic standards of the institution. And lastly, the emphasis of effective retention programs on the holistic learning and development of students in both their intellectual and social communities facilitates retention efforts.

With these principles of effective retention in mind and in light of the complex interplay that is evident with retention issues, one begins to contemplate feasible interventions that might assist higher education institutions to improve retention efforts. An educational pedagogy that not only involves academic (cognitive) and social (affective) integration but also makes more effective the ways in which students learn and make sense of their worlds, service-learning seems a logical and necessary response to Tinto's interactionalist model of student departure. Because both service-learning and Tinto's interactionalist model are concerned with students' academic and social lives, we will now consider related constructs to service-learning such as involvement theory and active learning, as well as service-learning itself, to further explore the applicability of service-learning to retention issues.

INVOLVEMENT THEORY & ACTIVE LEARNING

Involvement is a key construct in both service-learning theory (via active learning) and in college student retention theory (via academic and social integration). Astin's (1984) involvement theory, which evolved from his initial work on college student attrition, emphasizes the crucial role involvement plays in college students' lives. Involvement is defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Subsequently, involvement theory stresses active participation of students in their learning. According to Astin (1993), student involvement has tremendous potential for enhancing most aspects of college students' cognitive and affective development. Generally speaking, greater student involvement in college (in the classroom, co-curricularly, and in interactions with faculty, staff, and peers) has been found to positively impact student learning and personal development (Astin, 1984; Astin, 1993; Astin, 1996).

Active learning – another hallmark of service-learning – is defined as any classroom activity that "involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). Active learning is also related to both social and academic integration in that it acts as a source of influence on both (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). A number of active learning techniques such as class discussions and higher order thinking activities were positively related to student retention, demonstrating that faculty classroom behaviors do play a role in the student departure process (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Furthermore, Tinto (1993) affirms active learning as a hallmark of effective retention programs as well.

Cooperative learning - as one type of active learning - was examined by Tinto (1997) in relation to the college student departure process. Characterized by small groups of students who work together to maximize individual and group members' learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991), cooperative learning has also demonstrated an empirical relationship in regard to social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and the college student departure process (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000).

Related to these various forms of active learning and involvement, Chickering and Gamson's (1987) "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" emphasize many similar, integral components for effective teaching and learning. The principles of good practice in undergraduate education are described as doing the following:

- Encourage contact between students and faculty
- Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students
- Use active learning techniques
- Give prompt feedback
- Emphasize time on task
- Communicate high expectations
- Respect diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering and Gamson, 1987)

Not only do many of these principles characterize key aspects of involvement theory, active learning, and cooperative learning, but they highlight many hallmarks of service-learning as well. In fact, a number of the ten principles of good practice for combining service and learning (Honnet and Poulsen, 1989), also relate to Gamson and Chickering's (1987) principles for good practice in undergraduate education. For instance, related to the "communication of high expectations" might be the "articulation of clear service and learning goals for everyone involved" or "the clarification of responsibilities for each person and organization involved". Connected to "emphasizes time on task", might be Honnet and Poulsen's (1989) related principle of "insuring that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved". Needless to say, the interconnections between involvement theory, active learning, collaborative learning, and service-learning are extensive and further emphasize the utility of effective teaching principles to assist students with both academic and social integration.

SERVICE-LEARNING: THEORY & RESEARCH

Service-learning is an educational pedagogy, a way of teaching and learning, that aims to "transform knowledge, students, faculty, communities, and institutions" (Stanton, 1998, p. 16). Service-learning is described as "the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other" (Jacoby, 1996, p. xi) and is a form of "experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5).

An important distinction, community service - which is sometimes confused with service-learning - is essentially student volunteerism that is not linked to coursework and typically does

not have a reflective component (Furco, 1996). The similarities between community service and service-learning are that they both involve service projects believed to benefit others but in volunteerism there is no explicit focus on the educational value or goals to be gained through the involvement. Service-learning, however, involves projects that are designed, implemented, overseen, and evaluated with the educational goals as a top priority (Waterman, 1997). Service-learning - like retention theory's incorporation of the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between individuals and environments - provides the opportunity for students to combine social interaction, academic work, and service, doing so in ways that also strengthens student bonds to the institution (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Some student outcomes affected by service-learning involve both academic and social aspects of a student's college experience as well as feeling connected to community, understanding the systemic nature of social problems, expanding one's notion of social justice, and increasing perspective-taking ability (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997). Moreover, Eyler and Giles (1999) further expand the outcome categories, describing the positive effects of service-learning on such areas as stereotyping/tolerance, personal development, interpersonal development, closeness to faculty, citizenship, learning and application, and problem solving/critical thinking.

Academically speaking, service-learning strengthens student learning, utilizing components of Kolb's (1984) active learning cycle wherein various kinds of student learning styles – concrete, reflective, abstract, and experimental - are addressed and engaged. Recent studies have shown that the largest group of college students consists of hands-on, active learners who learn most effectively through concrete experiences, beginning in practice and ending in theory (Schroeder, 1993). This knowledge of learning styles has proven to be extremely

powerful in understanding and assisting students whose preferred learning style is the opposite of the abstract, lecture style preferred by the majority of faculty (Schroeder, 1993).

Eyler and Giles (1999) discuss the positive effects of service-learning on numerous learning outcomes (though not necessarily those learning outcomes measured solely by letter grades or grade point average). Service-learning emphasizes learning that is acquired through rich problem-solving and in experiential settings, where students construct and refine complex knowledge structures. This knowledge is "not organized in discrete bits, but is connected to a complex network of principles, concepts, and other facts" (Eyler & Giles, 1999). From this newly constructed knowledge base, students are better equipped to apply what they have learned to new situations. Moreover, Astin and Sax (1998) describe the positive effects of community service (not to be confused with service-learning) on ten academic outcomes, demonstrating that undergraduate service involvement also enhances academic development. Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) put forth core outcomes articulated by students involved in both service and service-learning that include: personal development, connecting to others, citizenship development, understanding, application, and reframing.

Along with the many positive learning and cognitive outcomes associated with participation in service-learning, the social and affective outcomes are just as compelling. In fact, service-learning is such a good fit with Tinto's interactionalist theory as well as retention in general because it provides "multiple meaningful connections between students, faculty, and community and does so in ways that allow for diversity, which is also linked to retention" (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The potential for rich, diverse relationships and social and community connections illustrates service-learning's ability to provide bonds amongst students, faculty, and the community that would appear to contribute to social integration.

Furthermore, Astin and Sax (1998) found that community service participation was associated with greater increases in social self-confidence and positive peer group interactions. In regard to student-faculty interactions, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) indicate that a powerful factor for positive college outcomes with students is the opportunity to form close personal relationships with faculty. Findings concerning interaction with faculty demonstrated that these relationships not only increase social integration and consequently institutional commitment, but also increase the individual's academic integration (Tinto, 1975). Service-learning fosters these relationships by actively involving faculty in the learning process (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Administrators on college campuses continue to be concerned with the creation of close relationships between students, students and faculty, and students and the university; service-learning is a process that affords unique opportunities for students, faculty, and the community to work together in ways that strengthens not only student learning and development, but an institution's relationship with the community as well (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

Turning to effective design of service-learning programs, Eyler and Giles (1999) describe service-learning program characteristics that make a difference on a number of student outcomes (i.e., stereotyping/tolerance, personal development, interpersonal development, closeness to faculty, citizenship, learning/understanding and application, problem solving/critical thinking, and perspective transformation). The program characteristics themselves are categorized as placement quality, application, reflection (writing and discussion), diversity, and community voice (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 168). Placement quality concerns the site in the community where service takes place. Application relates to the ability of students to link what they are learning in the classroom to what they are doing in the community and vice versa. Reflection (both written and verbal) occurs when students are thoughtful about their experiences and

contemplate the meaning and linkages between their service work and classroom activities. Diversity relates to the opportunity students have to work with others of diverse racial, social, ethnic, or economic backgrounds. And lastly, community voice highlights the extent to which service-learning activities meet actual needs identified by community members (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 167-179). With each of these characteristics, a key distinction concerns the attention to quality that is represented so that thoughtfully and effectively designed programs are the result. This issue of quality - important to each aspect of a service-learning program - is especially significant to application and reflection in the achievement of academic goals (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 183).

As an extension to the program characteristic of reflection, Eyler and Giles (1999) assert five principles of effective service-learning that affect reflection: connection, continuity, context, challenge, and coaching (p. 183-185). Connection concerns people – students, peers, faculty, administrators, and community partners – as well as campus and community, experience and analysis, emotion and intellect, and present and future (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Continuity relates to lifelong learning and development and continuous reflection throughout college and beyond. Context is seen as allowing students to think and learn in particular settings with the appropriate tools, concepts, and knowledge. Challenge encourages growth as students expand their cognitions to make room for new knowledge and understanding. And coaching is the support students receive from faculty, community partners, and peers as they navigate their service-learning experiences, learn to think in new ways, and problem solve in a variety of settings (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 183-185).

RETENTION RECOMMENDATIONS & SERVICE-LEARNING

From Eyler and Giles' (1999) program characteristics and Tinto's (1993) aforementioned principles and practices of effective retention, we can begin to see how each might inform the other and where the commonalities reside. Additionally, specific recommendations for effective retention practices are highlighted in a special issue of the Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice (2001). Forty-seven recommendations for retention were gleaned from five articles within the special issue. Though not all of the 47 recommendations relate to service-learning, some recommendations are particularly relevant. For instance, Braxton and Mundy (2001) gleaned from Nora's article "The Depiction of Significant Others in Tinto's 'Rites of Passage': A Reconceptualization of the Influence of Family and Community in the Persistence Process" the following recommendations that might overlap with service-learning programs and goals:

- Faculty, staff, academic advisors, and administrators should attend to the holistic development of the student – both academic and co-curricular – by promoting growth and learning not only in the classroom but within the university community as well.

- Promote student awareness of and access to appropriate co-curricular programs and resources – i.e., support groups, peer counseling, mentoring programs, faith-based groups, residential colleges, and community service groups – that connect and support student in their incorporation into the university community.

- Promote faculty, staff, and administrator awareness of and access to appropriate co-curricular programs and resources – i.e., support groups, peer counseling, mentoring programs, faith-based groups, residential colleges, and community service groups – that connect and support student in their incorporation into the university community.

Furthermore, within the domain of academic programs specifically Kuh (2001) recommends the following:

- Consistently use good practices in teaching, learning, and retention programs.

- Intentionally tie the curriculum to students' lives outside the classroom to bring students into ongoing contact with one another and with campus resources, especially after the first year of study.

Bean and Eaton (2001) also offer two recommendations related directly to academic programs:

- Design service-learning programs in such a way that psychological growth occurs along four dimensions: approach/avoidance coping strategies, locus of control, academic and social self-efficacy.

- Design learning communities/freshmen interest groups in such a way that psychological growth occurs along the following dimensions: approach/avoidance coping strategies, locus of control, academic and social self-efficacy.

Learning communities - wherein courses are linked around common themes and students are combined in cooperative work groups – was one recommendation strongly emphasized by Tinto (1993). Service-learning could be easily incorporated into a learning community, providing students numerous avenues for academic, social, and personal success while also contributing to their persistence. This idea seems to offer a wealth of possibilities for retention as well as service-learning while providing students greater opportunities for academic and social integration via formal and informal interaction with faculty and peers, resulting in greater persistence toward graduation.

Braxton and Mundy (2001) offer one additional recommendation that informs service-learning:

- Active learning activities such as service-learning and learning communities should be promoted and utilized within academic programs to increase psychological, as well as intellectual, growth and development of students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE-LEARNING PRACTICE

Drawing on the aforementioned principle and recommendations for service-learning, retention programs, and teaching - it would appear that if service-learning programs want to enhance retention, the following guidelines can assist in those efforts:

1. **Design service-learning projects to maximize interaction for students of diverse backgrounds** – Eyler and Giles (1999) note the most frequently reported value of service-learning was the opportunity to interact in meaningful ways with people from diverse backgrounds. Service-learning creates opportunities for developing close personal relationships among students. Additionally, Levine and Cureton (1998) describe the potential that collaborative work has for students of diverse backgrounds in breaking down segregation on campus, hence promoting greater social integration.

2. **Design service-learning projects to facilitate interaction between faculty members and students** - Students often describe the significant benefits they encounter due to their frequent and close contact with faculty throughout their service-learning experiences (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Eyler and Giles (1999) describe close student-faculty relationships as an independent predictor of many positive outcomes. Consequently, interactions with faculty through a service-learning experience can positively affect student learning and cognitive development, and in turn, social and academic integration.

3. **Design service-learning projects to incorporate involvement among faculty members, students, and administrators (i.e., student affairs personnel, counseling staff)** – Because retention and service-learning efforts often flow from a combination of institutional stakeholders (Tinto, 1993), increasing awareness among relevant parties about programs and resources is a proactive step to mediate departure. This will not only better connect students on campus but will provide an infrastructure of support for their learning *and their staying*.

4. **Use reflection activities that promote students' personal and cognitive development** – Effective reflection activities can be guided by Eyler and Giles (1999) Five C's: connection, continuity, context, challenge, and coaching. Reflection activities that are engaging or collaborative, involving interactions with other students and/or faculty, and that assist students in integrating their service and classroom experience, are viewed as critical to students' learning and development (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

5. **Use reflection activities that engage students with peers in the classroom** – Given that active learning acts as a source of influence on both social and academic integration (Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan, 2000) - and since the quality and quantity of reflective discussion during service-learning is associated with the development of close student relationships (Eyler and Giles, 1999) - the use of reflection activities that actively engage students has great potential in delivering positive outcomes. These outcomes may relate to social and/or academic integration .

6. **Encourage students to reflect on how their community experiences might relate to the skills or activities they want to pursue as part of their personal career development** – Tinto (1993) describes a key source of departure relating to students' inability to resolve their educational and occupational goals. By better connecting students' service experiences to not only their academic goals, but their career development as well, students may be better able to articulate and pursue these goals leading toward graduation and beyond.

7. **Build service-learning into the freshman year to help establish diverse campus and community connections early on** - The national average for freshmen at four year colleges who do not persist to their sophomore year is greater than 26 percent (Comarow, 2000). Similar findings were also discussed by Tinto (1993) who noted that the majority of attrition occurs during the first year of college and prior to the second. Therefore, fostering connections in the freshman year among students, their campus, and the community through service-learning may help strengthen students' academic and social integration.

8. **Utilize the principles of good practice in undergraduate education with service-learning programs**– Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles of good practice include student-faculty contact, reciprocity/cooperation, and active learning, to name a few. Each of these principles can be seen in effective service-learning programs (Eyler and Giles, 1999). For example, cooperative learning have been positively linked to social integration and institutional commitment (Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan, 2000). Therefore, providing such activities wherein students are afforded the opportunity to work in small groups may improve retention efforts.

9. **Create service-learning activities that meet diverse student learning needs** –Kolb (1985) highlights learning style differences and offers the Learning Style Inventory to assess such differences. Moreover, Chickering and Gamson (1987) highlight "respect for diverse talents and ways of learning" as a key principle for good teaching. By providing various kinds of learning activities within a service-learning experience, students with diverse learning styles and needs will more likely to participate in the class, engage with other students and faculty, and thus, succeed in their college endeavors.

10. **Design service-learning experiences with an explicit focus on quality in regard to placement, reflection, and application** - Because each of these areas is highly correlated with student learning and/or personal as well as interpersonal development (Eyler and Giles, 1999), constructing meaningful experiences and activities – in the classroom and in the community - will allow students the greatest opportunity for success and in turn, promote student retention.

These ten guidelines combine what is know about retention and service-learning theory and practice to inform and extend both. As the guidelines are implemented, the key appears to be a provision of sound research that reinforces what now appears to be logical connections between retention theory and service-learning. For example, further exploration regarding retention and service-learning might focus on the role of reflection in service-learning and its potential to impact student development as well as their social integration. Moreover, examining student interactions and relationships with faculty and how this relationship is strengthened by service-

learning, as well as its impact on retention, also might further our understanding of these areas and their contributions to one another. Fortunately, the solid foundation on which both retention and service-learning theory and research are based, affords a wealth of opportunities for practice. And in turn, these practices provide a natural impetus for further research that continues to strengthen and inform both service-learning and retention programs and activities.

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RETENTION GUIDELINES FOR SERVICE-LEARNING PRACTICE

1. Design service-learning projects to maximize interaction for students of diverse backgrounds.

2. Design service-learning projects to facilitate interaction between faculty members and students.

3. Design service-learning projects to incorporate involvement among faculty members, students, and administrators (i.e., student affairs personnel, counseling staff).

4. Use reflection activities that promote students' personal and cognitive development.

5. Use reflection activities that engage students with peers in the classroom.

6. Encourage students to reflect on how their community experiences might relate to the skills or activities they want to pursue as part of their personal career development.

7. Build service-learning into the freshman year to help establish diverse campus and community connections early.

8. Utilize the principles of good practice in undergraduate education with service-learning programs.

9. Create service-learning activities that meet diverse student learning needs.

10. Design service-learning experiences with an explicit focus on quality in regard to placement, reflection, and application.

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